The Poetry Sausage Machine: Creative Writing as a Teaching Strategy

By Paul Rogers

As teachers of English, we are frequently urged to use works of literature with students at the intermediate level and above. Apparently, it is assumed that by simple exposure to works of literary merit, some form of progress in the target language will be acquired. I have argued often that bringing literature into the language classroom by itself is of little proven linguistic value. Students may learn to appreciate good writing if they are introduced to it gradually and as part of a structured program, but this is essentially a passive acquisition. Much can be gained from literature if we think of it as a practical resource in the EFL teacher's tool kit.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the actual writing of short, descriptive pieces can have a beneficial effect on the use of adjectives in students' writing. Furthermore, if the method is applied regularly and often, students will become quite skilled in the production of short, but evocative, pieces of written English. Once they have attained this skill level, they are much more likely to be genuinely appreciative of poetry *per se* , and its place in the language classroom.

First Steps

Students are first introduced to writing these pieces as a class activity with the teacher in control. A subject is chosen from a selection of previously successful subject areas, and written on the board. The board itself is then divided into three equal columns, headed as follows:

HEAR	SMELL	SEE

We are now going to encourage responses from individuals. A favorite subject of the past few years has been "A Fairground at Night." We need, first of all, to list the various sense impressions that can be recorded under the three headings. These will be fairly obvious: Under HEAR we'll get the loud and blaring music, the screams of people on scary rides, perhaps a child's cry, the sound of applause, the crack of guns in the shooting gallery. From SMELL we'll get the scent of onions and hotdogs, the oily smell of fairground machinery, the sweet aroma of cotton candy. SEE has the most to offer with the bright lights; the colorful, garish paint work; the contrast of the brilliant fairground with the dark of the night sky.

We now have the ingredients for our "sausage machine." They must be mixed up and squeezed out into the finished product.

The Making of a Descriptive Poem

I use the analogy of a sausage machine because we want the students to work with the words to create a poem from their simple descriptions. But first, the words themselves must be "spiced up."

I use another analogy here: That of poetry as being like condensed soup or undiluted fruit cordial. Descriptive poetry is a "condensed language"; it is so concentrated and intense that it needs our own interpretations to "dilute" the language and make it intelligible.

In their first attempts at creating something out of "A Fairground at Night," I suggest that the students be restricted to writing a poem that is only nine lines in length (three lines each from HEAR, SMELL, and SEE). During the first lesson, the items under each should be brief and should be restricted to nouns. The teacher then asks the class for adjectives to describe these nouns.

For example, under SMELL, someone may have given you *machines* or *engines*. You ask the students what these engines smell like. Will they have nice smells? You will get words like *heavy, smoky, oily,* and there's no reason why you can't throw in a couple of exotic ones like *acrid, choking,* or *pungent.*

When you have enough adjectives for a given noun, you ask the class to help you make a descriptive phrase to go on the board in place of the single word. Instead of just *engines* , we might now get: *smoking, pungent, oily engines* or *acrid, stinking, choking engines* and so on.

In this first session, the teacher is very much in control. S/he helps the students build up these phrases until the board is full. Now comes the hard part. Students must individually choose their own favorites from the ones on display, and arrange them in any order they like. You can suggest, for example, that there's no need to have three HEAR phrases, followed by three from SMELL and three from SEE; the nine lines may be in random order. Once a given time has elapsed, you then get students to read out their examples to the whole class.

This will probably be all the time you have to develop the first lesson. Much will depend on the age and level of the class, but even with fairly advanced students, there is ample material here for an introductory lesson.

Development

The success of the idea will now depend on how you develop the activity. While creating the poem, the teacher should not intrude on the students' choice of words and phrases. The students can work in pairs or small groups with the teacher sitting in on each group offering advice if and when it is needed. Finally, one group member performs the completed poem to the rest of the class.

To add interest, each group can be given a different subject area. Subsequently, classes can judge the most successful descriptive poem of the week, or choose their own subjects for different groups to work on.

By the time a class is confidently producing good descriptive poems of this nature, it is time to introduce figurative language. The class can produce similes without having to explain in detail what they are. As a natural extension of work done on comparisons, similes can be introduced both as a teacher- or student- centered lesson.

In a "sausage-machine" lesson, the teacher may limit students' choice to descriptions that compare things and encourage the use of different structures such as: *like a is to b* , or *as y as a z*. I have frequently introduced examples of famous poems here, so that students can see for themselves how similes are used by great poets. A popular choice of the past has been this example from Byron's *Destruction of Sennacherib*.

> The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
> And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
> And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
> When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

There is no need to restrict students with concepts like rhyme or rhythm. Once they get used to using language in this way, either individually or in groups, there is a natural tendency for them to create lines that have their own rhythm. On a purely practical level, it's a good idea to limit the number of words they can put in one line (no more than twelve, for example). This prevents the length and complexity of a line or a phrase becoming convoluted.

Metaphors can be introduced later and again, it's a good idea to show "realia" in terms of an actual poem. This example from Laurie Lea's *Field of Autumn* has often been used to good effect:

> The sheep, snailbacked against the wall, Lifts her blind face, but does not
> know
> The cry her blackened tongue gives forth
> Is the first bleat of snow.

From this point onwards, whether you introduce different styles, moods, genres and techniques will depend largely on the class and on how much time you can or wish to devote to this kind of work. With bright 14- 15 year olds, I have successfully moved on to areas like allegory and myth; parody, spoof, and pastiche; as well as attempting original work on sonnets, rhyming couplets, narrative verse, and for fun, limericks.

To return to the original premise of the sausage-machine, here are a few more examples of descriptive scenes which you may wish to try out in classes of your own: A storm in the desert; a family barbecue in the woods; a busy marketplace; a birthday party; a trip to the zoo; a circus performance; a day at the races; a night in a haunted house.

Conclusion

What you make out of the poetry sausage machine, is largely up to you. Some teachers may find it's a useful addition at the end of a day when a period of written work is called for. Others may wish to use it as an introduction to teaching literature (particularly poetry) in the language class. One of the best ways of understanding how poets work is to try and produce a poem of your own.

As a gentle introduction to structured creative writing it can be very rewarding, while on the syntax level, it has proved useful in practicing word order in sentences, particularly if you get students to use adverbs as well as adjectives in their poems.

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References

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